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Plea of Abel's Wife Put Swap in Motion

WASHINGTON, Feb. 16 (UPI).—The negotiations that ended in today's Powers-Abel trade began with a letter from the Russian spy's wife asking mercy for her husband.

Justice Department spokesman Edwin O. Guthman said today it all began a few months after the crash of Francis Gary Powers' U2. Mrs. Rudolf Abel wrote Abel's court-appointed attorney, James B. Donovan, from East Germany asking if he could get clemency for the convicted spy.

Mr. Donovan told the Justice Department about the letter. He then informed Mrs. Abel that she might send an appeal to President-elect Kennedy, who was to be inaugurated in a few weeks.

Mrs. Abel did, and the White House referred the appeal to the Justice Department. Reed Cozart, pardons attorney for the department, rejected it shortly after Mr. Kennedy took office.

GROUND'S STATED

He said there were not sufficient grounds for clemency.

Then came a further exchange of letters between Mrs. Abel and Mr. Donovan in which,

Mr. Guthman said, there was discussion of "various possibilities for Abel's release."

Throughout all this, Mr. Guthman said, Mr. Donovan kept the Justice Department fully informed and followed leads suggested by Mrs. Abel.

But Mr. Guthman told reporters that an exchange of correspondence which had been going on since last Winter appeared, within the last six weeks, to show "some real grounds for negotiations."

At that point, the Justice Department authorized Mr. Donovan to go to East Berlin to "explore the situation."

Atty. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy was "fully aware" of the developments, Mr. Guthman said. Mr. Donovan acted throughout

this time as Abel's lawyer but he had the blessing of the U. S. government.

The authorization from the Justice Department for Donovan to go to East Germany came within the last six weeks, Mr. Guthman said, and he actually went there two weeks ago. He carried a letter from Mr. Cozart "indicating that Abel's sentence might be commuted under proper circumstances."

Abel was not taken from prison and started on his journey to freedom until there was some indication that Mr. Powers would be released. But U.S. authorities maintained tight silence as to the details of how this indication came.

PAPERS SIGNED

Abel's commutation of sentence was signed by Kennedy to become effective at the time of the exchange. But the actual wording of the commutation was withheld along with the date it was signed. Atty. Gen. signed the order for Abel's release before leaving the United States for his current overseas tour. But the exact timing and wording of this order also were not made public.